

1914 Shooting Took 4 Willisville Lives

Friends Are Buried Side-By-Side

Information for this story was provided by Rex Franklin of Vergennes. It came by way of a letter to Franklin written in 1971 from Ezra Cooper, who at the time was living in California. Cooper was the brother of one of the subjects in this story.

By Jerry Willis

It is no secret that the early days of Willisville were rowdy. There was also an element of discrimination and distrust of the large Italian population which lived there. Reportedly the town was 80 percent Italian.

Ezra Cooper lived there in 1914 and says, "Willisville earned itself a hard name. There was gambling, drinking and fighting but it was seldom fatal. There was an element among the Italians—strictly hush hush. Several prominent Italians were invited for an evening walk and never returned, but no one would talk."

Cooper states that few of the fights were fatal, however, he has information about one fight which resulted in four deaths.

It was on a Sunday evening in October 1914, according to Cooper. Jimmy Edwards and Big Bill Cooper (he was only 5 feet 10 inches tall) had been to church. Afterwards they decided to walk to the depot and watch the 10 p.m. train go through town.

Edwards smoked roll-your-own cigarettes and was out of paper so the two decided to walk downtown to get some. While walking they saw Andy Adams come out of an ice cream parlor. Edwards asked Adams if he had any cigarette papers and Adams said, "no, but I have some Camels."

"No thanks," said Edwards. "I'll go to Pete's Place and get

He Stopped To Get Cigarette Paper

some."

Edwards kept walking and told Cooper he would be right back. Cooper yelled to Adams, "Jim is particular in what he smokes."

As Adams neared Main Street, Cooper noticed two men step out in front of Adams. One of them asked Adams for a cigarette paper. Adams said he had none. Then Adams yelled across the street to Cooper.

"Hey Bill," Adams yelled.

That is when the shooting began.

According to Ezra Cooper the two men who stepped out in front of Adams were brothers, Sam and Albert Piatt, two characters who were apparently somewhat feared and distrusted by the community.

Bill Cooper later said Sam Piatt grabbed Adams with Adams holding Sam Piatt between himself and Albert Piatt. Bill Cooper started across the street to help but Albert Piatt turned and shot him.

"The impact of the bullet turned me half-way around," Cooper reportedly said. "But I kept going and grabbed his (Albert's) gun hand. I held his

gun hand up and he kept shooting downward at me and I forced him into a window of a store building. By that time his gun was emptied. I couldn't see Andy (Adams)."

Cooper then collapsed.

At some point during the incident, Sam Piatt reportedly shot Adams, but Adams in turn shot Sam in the head. Adams fled the scene and Sam Piatt lay dead at the scene.

Big Bill Cooper, meanwhile, had been shot several times including a soon-to-be fatal wound in the stomach.

Albert Piatt was apparently arrested, but a group of people took him from police and killed him.

Cooper and Adams were taken to a hospital in Murphysboro where they both died. Adams lived about 24 hours and Cooper lived about 52 hours. Ezra Cooper says his brother told him the full story of what happened while he was still conscious in the hospital.

What was the motive for the shooting of Adams? Cooper states that Adams and a man by the name of Harry Keller had "roughed up a bunch of Italians in a bar." Soon after, Adams received a letter signed with a small black handprint—"the black hand."

Cooper says the Piatt brothers were suspects in other killings. They were unemployed, he said, but were well dressed and spent a lot of money around town.

Cooper believes his brother was shot because he was a witness to the shooting of Adams.

Bill Cooper and Andy Adams are buried side by side at the Percy IOOF Cemetery. One headstone marks their grave.